



Dene of the Northwest Territories

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The Dene (de nay) or Indian people of Canada's Northwest Territories have occupied a vast area of land totalling 450,000 square miles for the past 25,000 to 30,000 years.

Today there are seven tribes: Chipewyan, Yellowknives, Dogribs, Slaveys, Hare, Nahanni and Loucheux. They speak different Athapaskan languages which are similar enough to allow some intercommunication (the word "dene" or one of similar sound means "the people" in each tongue).

Pre-History The modern history of the Dene of the Northwest Territories dates from their first contact with Europeans in the middle of the 18th century. Of their ancient history little is known, for they kept only oral records.

In fact the question of how long man has inhabited the Mackenzie area may never be answered. It is possible that as early as 25 to 30 thousand years ago a relatively ice-free migration route could have existed from Alaska along the upper portions of the Mackenzie River, through the Yukon and southeast along a narrow strip in the vicinity of the present Alberta-Saskatchewan border.

During this period, Asiatic hunters stalking big game animals might have followed them across the land bridge into Alaska. From there they divided into many groups, always moving south through the forested land which borders the Yukon River, to eventually reach the Mackenzie River corridor. Archaeological evidence uncovered in the Great Bear Lake area and several sites in the southern Yukon confirm the route. No one really knows why the migrations ceased or when. Most authorities agree that with the exception of the Eskimos in the north, the last Indians came some six to eight thousand years ago. Artifacts found in the Great Bear Lake area have been estimated to be seven thousand years old.

The most recent of the migrants were the Dene or Athapascans. Of all the Indian language groups in North America, theirs is the most widespread and is in evidence from the Bering Sea to New Mexico.

Traditional Life Traditionally, the Dene were wandering hunters. They battled for survival in one of the world's most cruel and unpredictable environments. Their world was the vast belt of forest wilderness which stretches across the northland — dense forest, mainly of spruce and pine with some birch, poplar and willow, dotted with plentiful lakes, rivers and streams. There the Indians hunted many varieties of game: moose, bear and muskox where possible, mountain goat farther west, smaller creatures like

beaver and rabbits, but most of all, the ubiquitous meat source of the subarctic, the caribou. Some tribes tended to specialize: the Hare Indians are so called because they relied on the Arctic hare for food and clothing.

Most of the tribes supplemented their diet with fish. As nomads, they moved through the forest following the game, particularly the migrating caribou herds. During the short but splendid northern summer, the caribou moved northwards on to the treeless, lichen-covered 'Barrens' of the sub-Arctic tundra, and some of the Indians followed them. The Slaveys rarely left the forest, even for caribou. During winter all the tribes fled back following the caribou to the shelter of the trees.

The homes of these Indians were lodges of hides stretched over a framework of poles, while in summer temporary huts made of brush were common.

A rectangular hut of logs was sometimes used by the Nahanni and the Slavey Indians in winter. The Dogribs used their skin tipis in winter, well banked with snow, and with a fire on the earth floor to keep the family warm. The Loucheux did not travel much in the winter and had a more permanent dwelling built half underground. Sometimes more than one family co-operated in its construction and shared its shelter. In general, winter shelters were the same as those used in summer, but more substantially built and not as readily abandoned. These solid huts lasted several years and could be repaired.

As migratory hunters the inhabitants of the Mackenzie region kept only such tools and imple-



ments as were necessary, and which could not be manufactured on the campsite from local materials.

The men wore breechcloths, leggings and moccasins of caribou or other warm skins; they wore long shirts or tunics in winter, sometimes with hoods attached in the Inuit (Eskimo) way. The women wore long one-piece dresses. These garments were mostly plain, or decorated only with a few porcupine quills — except among the Loucheux, who tended towards decorated garments, hair dressing, face painting and other refinements learnt from the Tlingit and other tribes near the Pacific.

Before Europeans arrived, dogs were seldom used for transportation though they were domesticated by the Indians. The animals were small and of little use except for hunting. (Dogs as a source of power among the Indians of the area came after the white man, according to the research of Diamond Jenness of the National Museum of Canada). Toboggans and sleighs piled with the family food and possessions were hauled by hand. Toboggans were better suited to the slightly timbered country than sleds with runners. Where the woods were dense, a shorter toboggan was used and the trail chosen wound around the trees and stumps. Lobsticks — trees with all the branches removed except the crown, were common markers for trails and caches of food.

In winter, as in summer, Indian families followed the waterways whenever possible. On the big lakes when the snow was swept clean by the wind, dragging a toboggan was easier than on land.

The construction of canoes for summer travel took

place in the spring when the sap was running and the bark easy to peel in large pieces. There was some variety in the northern canoes. Birch bark was the favorite material but the tree does not grow as large as it does in eastern Canada and only small and heavily gummed and patched canoes could be made from it. Spruce bark was used to make larger canoes as was moosehide which was stretched over a spruce and willow frame.

Social Structure The social structure was not complex; the bands were family-linked groups in which the best hunters might be titular leaders able to offer guidance, but had no real authority or claims on obedience. Only the Loucheux, again through contact with the Pacific coast, had clan-like societies within the tribe, but these were not extensive.

When several independent family groups came together at a favorite fishery or hunting place, it was a time of rejoicing, communal dancing and games. The kind of dancing varied with the occasion. Some involved feasting and the exchange of gifts, but most were simply dances to release excess energy and express joy. The step was a kind of shuffle, with women taking smaller steps than the men and the whole group moving around a central fire. Music was provided by a drum or drums. The drum generally consisted of a single hide, from which the hair had been removed, stretched over a willow frame. It had a handle attached and it was beaten with a heavy stick to produce a resonant booming sound. The drummer often sang an accompaniment and was joined by the dancers. Some dances were endurance contests and were performed to exhaustion.

Games and contests also took place during these reunions. Simple guessing games, gambling games, and games of strength and skill with weapons were all common. Minor disputes were settled by a wrestling match.

Seasons of the Dene For most of the Dene each of the four seasons has its own special activities. Autumn begins early in September. It is a short season that ends when the rivers and lakes freeze and the first snow falls. Families leave their temporary summer hunting camps and return to their settlements. Ice fishing begins for dog and human food. Winter firewood is gathered, and stacked outside the house.

The winter trapping season begins when the marten, mink, lynx, otter, weasel, fisher, beaver, and fox are prime. The trapline is checked about twice a week. Moose or caribou are shot to supply fresh meat and bait for traps. Rabbits are snared, usually by the hunter's wife.



Spring lasts from early May to the middle of June. This is a busy time in the Mackenzie Delta and other muskrat and beaver areas. The hunters usually have camps that require only light repair each season. Summer begins in the second week of June and lasts until the end of August. Families gather for visits and many people move into tents. Canoes and outboard motors are repaired, and when the weather permits, gardens are sown.

The Fur Trade The way of life practised by the Indians of the Northwest Territories was not disturbed by the arrival of Europeans in Canada until the establishment of a Hudson's Bay Company fur trading post on the Churchill River in 1717. Goods from this post trickled to them through internal trade, as they did from the Russian post in Alaska. In 1789 Alexander Mackenzie, a fur trader with the Northwest Company of Montreal, travelled by canoe from his post on Lake Athabasca, past Fort Resolution, which had been built on Great Slave Lake in 1786, and thence down the river that bears his name to the Arctic Ocean. His reports opened the fur trade to the Northwest Company and to a host of private traders and wintering partners.

The Hudson's Bay Company also carried out many journeys of exploration in what was then Rupert's Land. By the mid 18th century the whole area was fairly well mapped, except for the Inuit (Eskimo) country. Many posts were built and abandoned during this period in a process of trial and error, but by 1850 most of the settlements that exist today had been founded.

Present Conditions The pattern of life among the Indians of the Northwest Territories is rapidly changing, although there are still some families who live off the land entirely. Every year there is a seasonal movement in most communities of part of the population, as families go to the fish camps and organized hunting parties seek fresh meat in season.

The old trading economy has given way to a cash or credit system. Fur marketed in 1978-79 was valued at \$5,745,400. Commercial fishing, mainly on Great Slave Lake, produced tons of fish, mostly whitefish and lake trout. Today many Dene work in permanent jobs with government, arts and crafts and private business. Guiding and work on oil exploration survey crews gives seasonal wage employment to many young people.

Once isolated except for the barge traffic in the summer, the entire Mackenzie District is now served by scheduled and charter aircraft. The Mackenzie Highway connects Yellowknife, Fort Simpson and other more southerly settlements with the highways of Alberta. The Dempster Highway connects the more northerly settlements with the south. There is also rail link between Pine Point and Grimshaw, Alberta.

Water transportation is still the best means of moving heavy equipment and bulk supplies. The Mackenzie River system is 1,700 miles long. In the winter of 1971 the first heavy equipment was moved by truck from Edmonton to Inuvik over a winter road bulldozed across the frozen tundra.

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